

The Relationship between Care and Democracy in the Thought of Jane Addams: Analyzing *Democracy and Social Ethics* through the Lens of the Feminist Ethics of Care

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Introduction

Jane Addams was a prominent figure in the United States during the early 20th century and was renowned both nationally and internationally. She delivered numerous influential speeches and published a significant body of work, including books and articles, which continue to shape the discourse on gender equality. Despite the value of Addams's insights, even from a modern perspective, they have not been adequately assessed. The purpose of this presentation is to propose a new approach for re-evaluating Addams.

The history of research on Addams is extensive, but her contributions have been evaluated primarily in the context of social work and peace activism. Her intellectual pursuits have been overlooked. This change has been significant since the 1990s.¹ These research trends offer valuable insights; however, they have limitations in terms of understanding the theoretical significance of Addams's vision of social change and the feminist political thought that she developed. For example, one can examine *Democracy and Social Ethics*, which was one of her most significant

¹ At present, two primary methodologies are being employed to examine Addams's intellectual characteristics. One approach is an analysis of her relationship with the pragmatism of her time (Seigfried 1996). This approach characterizes Addams as a Pragmatist Feminist, a feminist who enhanced her thinking with a pragmatic interest and method. This approach aims to extract the philosophical characteristics of first-wave feminism, which have not been emphasized in previous American philosophy research. It also seeks to demonstrate the existence of a feminist argument that was as strong as those of important philosophers of the same period, such as John Dewey and William James. The second approach is based on the first one and places greater emphasis on a more comprehensive historical analysis. Specifically, this approach examines Addams's relationship with evolutionary theories, which had a significant intellectual influence across the Atlantic in the second half of the 19th century (Fischer 2019). This approach provides a comprehensive analysis of the interconnectivity between Addams's arguments and the intellectual currents of her era, elucidating how her ideas were interpreted within that specific context.

works that received considerable acclaim after its initial release. The book is a compilation of Addams's series of lectures on social philosophy at Hull House. It comprises a diverse range of chapters on subjects, including guidance for immigrants, parent-child relationships, domestic help issues, labor issues, education, and the political background of Chicago. In the initial review, the book appeared to be a collection of lectures by a social activist with diverse themes presented in a somewhat haphazard manner. The book is not written in an academic style, making it challenging to provide a comprehensive explanation of the theories and viewpoints, even when reading the entire text. Employing methods from the history of philosophy and intellectual history, such as pragmatism and evolutionary theory, it is evident that Addams's arguments were situated within the intellectual context of the same period, thereby demonstrating their significant impact. However, to understand the theoretical underpinnings of her political and feminist discourse in detail, it would be beneficial to adopt a methodology that differs from the historical examinations of previous research.

This presentation will analyze the work in question from the perspective of care ethics, which forms the core of feminist political thought. My objective is to demonstrate that Addams's argument in *Democracy and Social Ethics* was focused on the challenges inherent in the concept of care and the strategies for overcoming them. Consequently, I would classify her as a thinker who advocated social change based on care.² By employing the lens of care ethics in the analysis, this presentation seeks to demonstrate that Addams's arguments retain their theoretical significance and continue to be relevant in the context of contemporary feminist political thought. By examining this work from the perspective of care ethics, I aim to explore the potential of reframing the arguments associated with feminist political thought as a continuum, extending beyond the boundaries of second-wave feminism to encompass the thoughts of first-wave feminism.

² As defined by Fisher and Tronto, care is an activity that addresses needs and encompasses nearly all aspects of our lives (Fisher and Tronto 1990). Held (2006) defined care as an activity and practice as well as a value that individuals should strive to achieve.

1. The Basic Argument: Individual Ethics and Social Ethics

In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams identifies and examines the distinctions between individual and social morality. She then considers the challenges inherent in individual morality from a social morality perspective. For Addams, ethics is another term for righteousness (Addams 2002, 5). Individual ethics refer to the righteousness that we owe to ourselves and our families and friends. Meanwhile, social ethics refers to the righteousness pursued in broader human relationships. In other words, it refers to the values pursued by society.

While Addams does not explicitly state this, the issues discussed in this work are based on the challenges that she has faced in her public and private caregiving activities at Hull House. As will be discussed in further detail later, all these topics are thought to be related to the bias in care and distortions of responsibility assignments that occur in the home, local community, and workplace. Let us examine the fundamental premise that Addams employs when discussing care relationships, as illustrated in Chapter 1, “Charitable Effort.” The theme of Chapter 1 is the perplexity experienced by charity visitors.³

The “perplexity” experienced by visitors is an ethical sense of discomfort that arises from encountering a moral standard that differs greatly from their own.⁴ They attempt to modify the immigrants’ code of conduct to align it with modern, rational standards that is more in line with urban life, but this approach fails. This is because the moral standards and logic of life prevalent in immigrant communities are starkly divergent from those of the visitors attempting to provide care. From the perspective of immigrants, the norms presented by visitors appear irrational. For instance, immigrants establish networks of strong mutual support with their neighbors. They are aware that they should be willing to make sacrifices for their neighbors in need or trouble, even if it means sacrificing themselves or their families. Meanwhile, philanthropists have attempted to encourage

³ Although this visitor is fictional, it is believed to be a representation of the circumstances experienced by the residents of Hull House, including Addams. For more details, see Hamington (2009).

⁴ Seigfried (2002) examined the philosophical aspects of “perplexity” in this work in detail.

immigrants to adopt a more rational lifestyle and promote a spirit of frugality that was familiar to their lives. This discrepancy led to confusion and misunderstanding on the part of the visitors. In other words, Addams identified the failures or obstacles in the care practices in question.

Addams posited that the divergence in moral standards observed between the immigrant community in Chicago and charity visitors was due to differing degrees of environmental adaptation. Immigrants and visitors were at different stages of evolution. Addams believed that the innate human tendencies to empathize with and assist others, which originated in early human history, served as fundamental ethical standards in immigrant communities. She referred to these immigrant ethical standards as “primitive” on several occasions. As Fischer (2019) reported, the core of Addams’s understanding of society was the diverse theories of evolution that existed at the time.⁵ Disparity in the degree of adaptation can lead to conflict and obstacles in mutual understanding. As Fischer frequently noted, Addams appeared to regard the various stages of human evolution as objective realities that can be empirically observed. Rather than criticizing the ethical standards of “primitive” immigrants, Addams’s argument about social evolution sought to instill a sense of humility in ethical deliberations by emphasizing the scientific knowledge of the differing degrees of urban environmental adaptation (Fischer 2019 Ch.2).⁶

It is important to note that the conflict between individual ethics and social ethics cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of “the primitive ethics of immigrants” and “the civilized ethics of visitors.” Addams’s argument was that the individual ethics of immigrant communities, which

⁵ In this case, the evolutionary theories did not refer to only Darwinism, which became the mainstream theory in biology in the 20th century. They also included the arguments of various other theorists, such as Herbert Spencer and Wilhelm Wundt. Furthermore, their scope of application extended to society and human morality. The following points illustrate the influence that evolutionary theory had on Addams (Pearce 2020). Human society is subject to the same principles of interdependence as other living beings. It adapts its form in response to changes in the environment. Furthermore, this change can extend to social structures, collective perceptions, and moral values. It is also the case that some societies are unable to adapt to change and thus remain in a state of “survival” in their original form. In such cases, groups that have adapted and those that have not exist in the same space in a mosaic-like pattern.

⁶ For further insight into how Addams incorporated evolutionary theory into her approach, see Fischer (2023).

remained at a “primitive” stage, were overly robust to adapt to the modern social ethics of charitable visitors. Furthermore, she highlighted that the ethical standards of not only the immigrants but also the well-intentioned visitors who sought to alter the immigrants’ way of life could potentially remain individual ethics. Imposing modern ethical standards on immigrants would result in the severance of social ties between visitors and immigrants. In other words, this approach fails to recognize the value of relationships, and Addams positions humility in opposition to visitors’ individual ethics (Addams 2002, 33). This approach is consistent with the emphasis on following children’s development and adapting methods and content to their evolving cognitive abilities. This is a way of being that considers the position of the individual being cared for. Visitors must undergo a process of learning from the perplexities that arise when their ideals conflict with reality. They must also reconstruct ethics as social constructs based on their relationships.⁷ In this chapter, Addams highlighted that the crucial point of ethics lies not in whether one remains faithful to one’s beliefs about being charitable but rather in whether one can be attentive to the individuals that one interacts with and whether one can construct care relationships as bidirectional engagements.

2. Problems of Individual Ethics: From the Perspective of the Allocation of Care

Responsibilities

In her seminal work *Moral Boundaries*, Tronto identified two inherent challenges in care: paternalism and parochialism (Tronto 1993, 141–47). Paternalism refers to the situation in which an individual assumes excessive authority in allocating responsibility for an issue. Parochialism refers to the establishment of an excessively narrow boundary between care responsibilities. Given the nature of care as an activity, it is probable that unequal power relationships are created between the parties involved. Tronto adds the perspective of the allocation of care responsibilities, stating that

⁷ Addams’s social–philosophical epistemology, which she described as “humility,” would be classified as “sympathetic knowledge” by Hamington (2009 Ch.4) and “relations of care” by Held (2006 Ch.3).

this is a case of “distortions of the kinds of responsibilities that people should appropriately assume” (Tronto 2013, 63). The misallocation of care responsibilities allows some individuals to avoid fulfilling these obligations while still benefiting from the resulting outcomes. Conversely, others bear an excessive burden of care responsibilities, which limits their ability to receive adequate care.

When we apply the discussion on the allocation of care responsibilities to *Democracy and Social Ethics*, it is evident that each case that Addams describes represents a distortion in the assignment of care responsibilities. In Chapters 2, 4, and 6 of this book, while the specifics of each case vary, they all revolve around a primary caregiver providing for or attempting to provide for a dependent person. These relationships are inherently asymmetrical, and they lack the intention of “caring with” (Tronto 2013 Ch.1).

In Chapter 2, that is, “Filial Relations,” Addams addresses the discrepancy between individual and social ethical standards in parent–child relationships while illustrating a scenario that resonates with her personal experiences.⁸ After graduating from university, her daughter, who recognized the importance of fulfilling her social obligations, was keen to get involved in community activities, but her parents strongly opposed her. From their perspective, even if she attends university, she should return home to assume responsibility for the family’s well-being, which is the expected role of a family member. The daughter’s actions and statements appeared to indicate a lack of consideration for her familial responsibilities, particularly her desire to engage in social activities without fulfilling her familial duties. Addams compares this situation with the father–daughter relationship between Lear and Cordelia in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (Addams 2002, 46). Addams compares the father with King Lear, highlighting the limitations of his approach to securing legitimacy through a relationship of gratitude for the father. By contrast, the daughter’s actions demonstrate a commitment to building a relationship based on social ethics.

⁸ Addams had a similar experience with her own education and career after graduation. Chapter 3 is thought to be based on this experience. For biographical details, see Brown (2007) and Knight (2006; 2010).

Chapter 4, “Industrial Amelioration,” focuses on the Pullman Strike, a pivotal event in the history of the American labor movement. Addams played a key role in the strike as an arbitrator, portraying the strike’s principal figure as a benevolent employer who prioritizes the well-being of his workers.⁹ The employer constructed a model town for his employees and provided them with various conveniences. The deteriorating economic climate resulted in mounting tensions between labor and management. Workers’ wages were reduced while the company was reluctant to lower housing rent. The employer remained unyielding in their refusal to negotiate with the workers, leading to significant labor disruption and even armed conflict. Why was the employer reluctant to engage in negotiations and collaborate with the workers? From his philanthropic perspective, the workers’ opposition meant that they had betrayed the employer’s benevolent approach. However, according to Addams, the real reason was that the employer refused to engage with the workers and continued to maintain a unilateral charitable relationship (*Ibid.*, 70). As in the father–daughter relationship discussed in Chapter 2, the issue here is that the giver, or the person providing care, failed to establish a relationship with the recipient of that care. Addams identified a common thread between the father–daughter dynamic, which was likely prevalent at the time, and the historical labor dispute that resulted in casualties due to military intervention. She recognized a common underlying issue in the conflict between individual and social ethics.

In Chapter 6, “Political Reform,” Addams illustrates how an alderman (an elected member of a city council) can enhance his political standing by aligning himself with the moral values of the immigrant community.¹⁰ An alderman maintains his position by providing immigrants with benefits

⁹ The Pullman Strike, which broke out in Chicago in 1894, subsequently merged with the American Railway Union led by Eugene Debs and developed into a nationwide labor movement. President Grover Cleveland deployed federal troops to intervene in the strike, resulting in 13 deaths. George Pullman, the owner of the Pullman Palace Car Company, which initiated the strike, had constructed a company town for his employees and managed it in a philanthropic manner. However, after the strike commenced, he persisted in refusing to negotiate with the labor union.

¹⁰ The person discussed here is Johnny Powers, an alderman of the Chicago 19th Ward, where Hull House was located. Addams and Florence Kelley ran unsuccessful negative campaigns against Powers in 1896 and 1898. For further details, see Knight (2010 Ch.3) and Fischer (2019, Ch.4).

that are not in line with established rules. Why have no condemnations been issued? It would be an oversimplification to assume that the alderman is deceiving the immigrants. The rationale is that the alderman is perceived as a benevolent figure who advocates for the immigrants' interests. He secures votes from the immigrant community by offering them comprehensive local information and benefits. These include financial assistance for bails, intervention in the judicial system, job and position offers in return for votes, and funeral expenses (*Ibid.*, 101). The alderman was accused of engaging in political corruption. However, from the perspective of the immigrants, his actions were perceived as a reflection of his benevolence in addressing their challenges and providing support. The alderman leverages his authority to facilitate the large-scale replication of mutual assistance and supports the idea that immigrants typically engage with on a smaller scale. In other words, from the perspective of the immigrants, he is perceived as "a good man" who provides them with assistance and support.

Considering Tronto's perspective, it can be argued that the relationships depicted in these three chapters are problematic due to their reflections on unequal power dynamics and lack of inclusivity in the provision of care. The parents who reject their daughter's social orientation, the business owner who sees workers as merely objects of compassion, and the city council member who panders to immigrants are all focused on maintaining a one-sided care relationship and are reluctant to alter their paternalistic stance. Furthermore, they attempt to maintain control over the scope of their caregiving responsibilities and are reluctant to foster a more expansive relationship. Consequently, the allocation of care responsibilities is misaligned. This results in the complexity and understanding of the context of the care relationship being abandoned, which, in turn, perpetuates the relationship between the "independent" caregiver and the "dependent" care receiver. The caregivers' actions, which are intended to align with individual ethical standards, may ultimately impede the care recipients' moral growth and development (*Ibid.*, 104).

It is worth noting that the lack of understandable structure in the book's content, as noted in the introduction of this presentation, is more coherent when viewed from the perspective of a

critique of individual ethics. Addams identified two key issues in individual ethics: paternalism and parochialism. This resulted in distorted care responsibilities and allocation. The relationships depicted in the three chapters perpetuate individual ethics, which are characterized by imbalanced power dynamics and parochialism. This ultimately results in the distortion of care responsibilities and an inability to establish a democratic care society. Furthermore, the prevalence of care relationships based on individual ethics in the homes and living spaces of workers and immigrants makes it challenging to initiate discussions encouraging reconsideration. Addams intentionally distributes the topics throughout the book in a way that makes them appear unrelated. Thus, she aims to demonstrate how individual ethics have a pervasive influence across all levels of society and are challenging to comprehend from conventional perspectives.

3. Democracy as Social Ethics

To understand the social ethics discussed by Addams in *Democracy and Social Ethics*, it is essential to grasp two theoretical points. First, even if they are individual at first glance, needs are a part of society. Therefore, the satisfaction of needs has legitimacy for not only the individual but also all individuals. They must be considered within the context of relationships, whether in terms of recognition or fulfillment. Moreover, in an urbanized society in which individuals from diverse backgrounds interact, each person's needs cannot be isolated from those of others and must be collectively considered. The various forms of care provided by an aldermen to immigrants, including food, clothing, shelter, jobs, medical services, entertainment, and youth development, are not limited to immigrant communities but are rather highly common throughout the city as a whole. For this reason, Addams asserted that attempting to restrict care to narrow relationships, such as those between workers and an employer or immigrants and an alderman, is not a viable approach from a public legitimacy standpoint.

Upon this foundation it ought not to be difficult to build a structure of civic virtue. It is only necessary to make it clear to the voter that his individual needs are common needs, that is, public needs, and that they can only be legitimately supplied for him when they are supplied for all. / [...] The demand should be universalized; in this process it would also become clarified, and the basis of our political organization become perforce social and ethical. (Ibid., 117)

In this manner, Addams recognized that individual needs are common/public needs and emphasized the legitimacy of providing for all people. Political organizations that aim to meet the needs of all individuals must be built on social and ethical foundations. In other words, the political organization that Addams envisions reflects social ethics.

Second, a political organization founded on social ethics must be based on democratic principles. Addams contrasts the alderman with the reformer, who is attempting to advance political reform through a group of experts. According to Addams, an alderman may pursue a more ethical path to social development than a reformer can. This is because the former engages in substantial moral efforts to enable the masses to express themselves and integrate collective energy and wisdom into the community. It is evident that this is a form of sarcasm. Addams argues that democracy is essential for the implementation of social ethics. If the “reformers” can exert control over the local community, it is due to their adoption of a repressive approach. However, they have avoided cultivating relationships with the citizens. According to Addams, if they are required to respond to social needs and adapt the necessary political structures to meet them, they will inevitably encounter the discomfort of transitioning to a new type of democratic relationship. This context of uncertainty or “perplexity” reveals the true value of democratic relations (Ibid., 118).

Various initiatives that respond to needs are embodied in democratic processes through constant testing and revisions. Ethics are inherently conservative, as they are interconnected to customs. However, there are instances in which a minority or individual within a group has a higher

ideal and attempts to change the current situation. The initiatives that they undertake, such as workers' movements to enhance their quality of life, employers' efforts to improve industrial conditions, and social work by philanthropists, may or may not prove successful. The key issue is not determining whether the outcome is successful. The crucial point is that the initiative serves as a catalyst for social change. Various care initiatives have been implemented through progressive measures, and the results have been made public and observed by many citizens. Through this process, a decision is made regarding whether the initiative should be incorporated as a government function. In other words, the responsibility for responding to needs is socialized through testing and democratic processes involving a number of practices.

Each social experiment is thus tested by a few people, given wide publicity, that it may be observed and discussed by the bulk of the citizens before the public prudently makes up its mind whether or not it is wise to incorporate it into the functions of government. (IbId., 74)

Addams refers to the democratic process as “lateral progress.”¹¹ Lateral progress is defined as an increase in the moral standards of a community’s members, achieved through the expansion of recognition and fulfillment of needs through a democratic process. By contrast, perpendicular progress refers to the ethical development of individuals on their own initiative. In contrast to perpendicular progress, lateral progress is geared toward ethical improvement among individuals with social relationships, necessitating a slower pace. The path towards ethical progress for a larger number of people requires a gradual approach. However, this slowness is not a deficiency.

¹¹ The term “lateral progress” is mentioned in *A Modern Lear* (1912). For more details on lateral progress, see Eddy (2016); Fischer (2019); and Hamington (2004).

Progress has been slower perpendicularly, but incomparably greater because lateral. He has not taught his contemporaries to climb mountains, but he has persuaded the villagers to move up a few feet higher; added to this, he has made secure his progress. (*Ibid.*, 69)

Addams's statement on lateral progress appears to align with the concept of "caring with," as discussed in *Caring Democracy* by Tronto. In one of the most important sections of this document, Addams sets out her view on democracy as follows:

We are thus brought to a conception of Democracy not merely as a sentiment which desires the well-being of all men, nor yet as a creed which believes in the essential dignity and equality of all men, but as that which affords a rule of living as well as a test of faith. / [...] To follow the path of social morality results perforce in the temper if not the practice of the democratic spirit, for it implies that diversified human experience and resultant sympathy which are the foundation and guarantee of Democracy. (*Ibid.*, 7)

In Addams's view, the cornerstone of democracy is the creation of a social ethos in which individuals recognize and accommodate each other's challenges, collaborate, and strive to harmoniously navigate shared spaces. Addams posits that the concept of democracy is realized when social ethics become the norm in everyday life. At the core of Addams' theory of democracy is the idea of care, which, based on modern care ethics, recognizes and addresses the unique situations and burdens of individuals to facilitate a positive and meaningful environment for well-being. Although it may not be accurate to say that Addams reached the level of modern care ethics, it is possible to evaluate her as a pioneering figure. Furthermore, her involvement in numerous political and peace movements at the turn of the 20th century, espousing democratic ideals, provides an opportunity to reevaluate her status as a feminist political thinker.

Conclusion

The summary of the discussion in this presentation is as follows. It is essential to reassess Addams's role within the genealogy of feminist political thought, given her status as a pioneering figure in the field of care ethics. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the context in which Addams operated, it is crucial to connect the ideas left behind by Addams and other feminists of the same historical period. While Addams's argument offers valuable insights, it is important to recognize that it does not fully address all the key issues related to the current theory of care ethics. Some aspects can be regarded as theoretical reservations. However, despite the passage of approximately over a century since the era of first-wave feminism, the issues that Addams raised regarding care and democracy remain or have become even more pertinent for us today. The contemporary significance of focusing on Addams lies in the possibility of sharing insightful thoughts on care across time and space, presenting a valuable opportunity for further exploration.

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